

# Failure to Operationalize: Investing in Critical Multicultural Art Education

JONI BOYD ACUFF

The Ohio State University

“Because of the many assumptions and ideas that have become attached to the word multiculturalism, its power, practices, and policies are deteriorating.”

ProPublica (2015) completed a study looking at three decades of federal data on fatal police shootings and found that Black males are 21 times more likely to be shot dead by police than White males the same age. The deaths of unarmed Black males by armed White males and police officers has moved America into a tense racial divide in many areas of the United States. With this data in mind, the author makes a call for art educators to assume an educational framework that guides the destabilization of institutional power and places equity at the forefront of art teaching. By advocating for a Critical Multiculturalism to help teachers develop a pedagogy that critiques power and supports various cultural voices and lived experiences, the author makes two primary suggestions that can potentially guide art educators in their investment in critical multicultural priorities.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the author: [acuff.12@osu.edu](mailto:acuff.12@osu.edu)

I have wept over a dozen times thinking about the conversations about race that I will eventually have to have with my two Brown sons, currently ages four and one. Daily, my arms embrace my sons' fragile frames with all of the strength in my body. And, after the announcement of each murdered unarmed Brown son by an armed White policeman I seem to be able to squeeze my boys just a bit tighter and appreciate the comfort of their soft skin pressed against mine, leaving my tear residue for them to wipe from their faces. As I consider their futures, my tears become moans of fear that my two growing boys may not even have a future if things continue the way they are. This is my reality.

Unfortunately, this is my sons' reality.  
(Anonymous, Personal communication,  
August 24, 2014)

**T**his African American mother's self reflection is emotional and raw and addresses a reality in the United States today. Black males are 21 times more likely to be shot dead by a police officer than White males the same age.<sup>1</sup> The deaths and severe bodily harm of unarmed Black boys and men by armed White males and police officers has moved America into a tense racial divide that is graphically articulated almost daily in news reports. Clearly, the majority-minority conflict is still present in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Singleton, 2013; Stoll, 2014), and

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<sup>1</sup> ProPublica, "an independent, non-profit newsroom that produces investigative journalism in the public interest," analyzed three decades of federal data on fatal police shootings (ProPublica, 2015, para.1). The number 21 represents the final three years of data, from 2010 to 2012 (Gabrielson, Grochowski & Sagara, 2014).

even on the rise<sup>2</sup> and whether implicitly or explicitly, racism exists in American life (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Stoll, 2014). Bonilla-Silva (2010) writes, "Racial considerations shade almost everything in America" (p. 1), and racism is guided by the desire to maintain positions of privilege and power in a racialized society (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Because there are inextricable linkages between knowledge and power (Apple, 2004), the field of education is directly and indirectly influenced by race and racism and educators are implicated in the struggle.

Educators must be cognizant of the type of society in which they are educating students (Hicks, 1990). This consciousness enables educators to utilize relevant pedagogical strategies that attend to the specific needs of the society. Lewis, O'Connor, and Mueller (2009) assert that race and racism are "central to conversations about the role of education in promoting social justice as well as in promoting more just educational outcomes and experiences" (p. 249). It is not effective to claim to be race neutral in teaching. Stoll (2014) writes, "Teachers and administrators are not only influenced by cultural assumptions regarding race but often perpetuate these assumptions whether deliberate or not" (p. 691). For this reason, multicultural education pedagogy, curriculum and praxis are even more imperative now than it was 70 years ago at its inception. Multicultural education was conceived

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<sup>2</sup> A few high profile cases include victims, Trayvon Martin (deceased, 2012), Jordan Davis (deceased, 2012), Jonathan Ferrell (deceased, 2013), Mike Brown (deceased, 2014), Eric Garner (deceased, 2014), John Crawford (deceased, 2014), Levar Jones (injured, 2014) and Jamal Jones (injured, 2014).

on the premise that all students, regardless of race, gender and class, should have an equal opportunity to learn. Its major goals were to improve academic achievement and transform educational institutions through both curriculum and environment (Banks & Banks, 2012). Those original goals, as well as updated, contemporary goals like critiquing power and addressing cultural subjugation should be at the forefront of our art teaching agenda. This updated version of multiculturalism in this article will be called *critical* multiculturalism.

In this article, I share a personal, authentic reflection on the status of multiculturalism in art education. Then, I briefly offer evidence for the contention that art educators have failed to operationalize continuous, contemporary multicultural classroom practices and pedagogy. Then, I urge art educators to commit to learning, understanding and activating critical multiculturalism and its current, critical priorities and goals. This article culminates with my articulation of two specific strategies that can potentially guide art educators' revised understandings and investment in critical multiculturalism as a useful, accessible pedagogical tool.

### **Multiculturalism [muhl-tee-kuhl-cher-uh-liz-uh m]: The demise of a frame**

The term "multiculturalism" has become an overused buzzword and has been used so often and in so many ways that art educators have become indifferent to its potential. It has become a word art educators use to be politically correct, but most teachers aren't able to articulate its tenets, let alone figure out how to operationalize it (Acuff, 2014a; Alden, 2001). Because of the many assumptions and ideas that have become attached to the word multiculturalism, its

power, practices, and policies are deteriorating (May & Sleeter, 2010). Multiculturalism is most commonly and simply associated with supporting diversity and teaching tolerance in the classroom and in educational reform, but not necessarily critiquing the complex power structures that create oppressive systems of marginalization and educational disparity (Acuff, 2014a; Ballengee-Morris, 2013; Delacruz, 1996). Many scholars have deemed this understanding of multiculturalism as "liberal" (May & Sleeter, 2010; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995), and lacking the ability to "tackle seriously and systematically...structural inequities, such as racism, institutionalized poverty, and discrimination" (May & Sleeter, 2010, p. 3). Another issue affecting the realization of multiculturalism is the concept of color-blindness, which refers to the idea that race is irrelevant and does not impact equity and access in America (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). A large majority of Americans believe that they live in a post-racial America and have deemed themselves "color-blind" (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Markowitz & Puchner, 2014; Stoll, 2014). These issues directly relate to the superficial commitment to multicultural practices and pedagogy in art education.

Cho and DeCastro-Ambrosetti (2005) explain that when they initiate discussions on topics of diversity, students balk, and colleagues are resistant and/or discredit its relevancy in contemporary U.S. education. This dismissive reaction is problematic, as it demonstrates a disregard for how historical oppression (i.e. slavery, institutionalized racism) feeds into the contemporary lives of people of color, particularly as it relates to education. Because Black males have a graduation

rate of only 59% compared to 80% of their White counterparts (Schott, 2015), this is clearly an important issue for contemporary education.<sup>3</sup> Racism is the most devastating factor contributing to the inability of children of color to achieve at their highest levels (Singleton, 2013). With this in mind, educators must understand the need for and significance of critical multiculturalism and its most contemporary objective to destabilize systemic inequity and dominant power. Specifically, art teachers can work to make the connections between Brown and Black children's lived realities and the negative images that create disparities not only in education, but also in life. Racist, stereotypic imagery and representations have informed society's understandings about people of color since the late 1800's (Crum, 2015). The historic imagery steadily informs contemporary media (Crum, 2015) and research has shown that it informs teachers' perceptions of students of color (Gorski, 2011). I call on art teachers to operationalize critical multiculturalism and support my call for an investment in not only our students' education, but in us as effective multiculturally-embodied art educators.

There are a number of noteworthy art education scholars who assume theoretical frameworks with goals and tenets that are in line with the goals and tenets of critical multiculturalism (*See e.g.* Acuff, 2014a; Ballengee-Morris, 2013; Bey, 2011; Cosier, 2011; Desai, 1996, 2000; Delacruz, 1996; Garber, 2004; Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; Stuhr, Ballengee-Morris, & Daniel, 2008; Slivka, 2011). Using frames such as critical theory, critical

race theory, feminist theory, social justice theories, and queer critical theory, these educators urge conversations about race, they critique institutionalized power systems and educational inequity, and they initiate the destabilization of cultural subjugation. This paper speaks specifically to art educators who are not critical theory scholars and have trouble identifying the differences and deficits in liberal multiculturalism. Contemporary, critical multiculturalism is a way of seeing and thinking about the relationships amongst culture, power and knowledge creation (Howe & Lisi, 2014). Enacting critical multiculturalism requires a heightened level of consciousness regarding the society we live in and the power structures that influence and maintain educational inequity (Howe & Lisi, 2014; May & Sleeter, 2010). An example of such mindfulness includes critiquing standardized, mainstream-centric art curricula, and deciding to utilize student narratives to build student-centered curriculum (Howe & Lisi, 2014). Curriculum is a systemic tool that has the power to either support the status quo, or question it; thus, it impacts educational equity (Jay, 2003; Howe & Lisi, 2014). It is imperative that educators learn ways to identify hegemonic curriculum that "positions cultures within a Eurocentric framework" (Acuff, 2014b, p. 307) and "helps to maintain the dominance of popular mainstream academic knowledge" (Jay, 2010, p. 4). Critical multiculturalism can empower educators to disrupt universalized knowledge and counter normalized narratives.

Unfortunately, decades of scholarship contend that art educators often fail to fully comprehend

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<sup>3</sup> This statistic is a national average from the 2012-2013 school year and included all 50 states.

multiculturalism and how to be multicultural in the art classroom (Acuff, 2014a; Alden, 2001; Delacruz, 1996; Stuhr, Ballengee-Morris, & Daniel, 2008). Art educators need to invest time into comprehending and nurturing culturally diverse learners' sociocultural realities, needs, and ways of being in the world. It is essential, in this time of escalating racial violence to invest in working rigorously to galvanize critical multiculturalism in art education.

### **What does “investing” look like?**

Investing requires the devotion of time, the desire to nurture, and it implies that there is a commitment to build. Illustrations of investing in critical multiculturalism include engaging in conversations about institutional power and the relationship between race and varying inequities, specifically educational inequity;<sup>4</sup> inviting students to analyze their learning experience, as well as the information disseminated through textbooks and curriculum; and also helping students understand personal accountability and opportunities for action. Critical multiculturalism is about student and teacher self-reflection. In the following sections, I articulate two recommendations that can lead art educators' investment in critical multicultural priorities in art education. I suggest the following as strategic points of departure to operationalize critical multiculturalism and invest in this revised framework to guide our pedagogy in art education.

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<sup>4</sup> Gunner and Torres (2002) write, “Race in this society [the United States] tracks wealth, wealth tracks education and education tracks access to power” (p. 48).

### **Invest in learning.**

We learn from our failures. Art educators must *invest in learning* from their personal failures in multicultural education work. It is critical to acknowledge and accept failure in practice and pedagogy, and use the experience to grow into a more conscious educator. Acuff (2014a) shares an excerpt from a doctoral student's art education course journal, “[As an elementary art teacher,] my attempts at diversity and multiculturalism have almost always been fruitless. They start with good intentions, but almost always dissolve into an ‘othering’ of a culture (personal communication, February 1, 2012)” (p. 74). This art teacher's failure implies that she first took the risk to be uncomfortable and worked towards being a multicultural educator, even though she did not quite understand how to be.

Feather (1989) writes,

People may perform poorly or withdraw from a task after failure because they believe that outcomes are independent of their responses; that is, they have no control over events. They may develop causal attributions that failure is due to internal and stable causes, such as lack of ability, and give up trying. They may not try hard because enhanced effort would be dissonant with their low expectations of success. (p. 68)

I encountered the withdrawal that Feather (1989) describes during my tenure as a teacher trainer in more than one university. Pre-service, as well as in-service teachers, have communicated to

me that they are too afraid to attempt multiculturalism because they fear offending groups of people, or “doing it wrong.” It is critical that a fear of inadequacy does not cripple or overwhelm teachers’ desires to be multicultural educators. In order to fail and to learn from those failures, there must first be an attempt, a risk taken, and an overwhelming desire to be an effective educator. Embracing failure is imperative in order to build and identify new goals. This type of refocusing may result in more fruitful attempts at multiculturalism.

Art educators need to *invest in learning* about and making connections to society and how it manipulates classroom and pedagogical responsibilities. Education is constantly in flux because of societal facets such as immigration, poverty, health, economics, and crime (Apple, 2004; Greene, 1993). Events in learners’ local and national communities are just as influential to those learners’ education as any textbook (Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2011). Students have a better chance at educational success if they are made to feel positive about their home culture, as well as the majority culture (Ladson-Billings, 2009). To help with this, teachers should reassess the way they do their work and “find ways of connecting their education efforts to local communities, especially to those members of these communities with less power...” (Apple, 2004. p. xiii). For example, teachers can involve students in selecting reading materials that are in line with their cultural frames of reference, use art to explore issues facing students’ actual home community, and lead students in critically analyzing representations of their community made in the local news.

Unfortunately, students who live in communities with less cultural power experience violence, poverty, and death more frequently than other students. The claim that these topics are “too violent” or “too difficult” (Cohen-Evron, 2005) to teach about or teach through in the art classroom is an unacceptable excuse. Such unfathomable societal conditions are some children’s reality, and though conceptually difficult, these topics are never inappropriate to consider when constructing curriculum and building pedagogy. Art educators cannot continue to ignore the “undesirable” realities of their students. Art educators can, instead, acknowledge, embrace, and use students’ true lived realities to guide meaningful classroom experiences. Wyman and Kashatok (2008) write, “Teachers who do not share their students’ backgrounds can get to know their students’ communities and draw on those developing relationships to redirect and improve their own teaching” (p. 299).

Connecting society to the classroom also means that teachers are inevitably going to have to acknowledge, consider and talk about race. Therefore, teachers need to *invest in learning* how to talk about race (Lee, 2012; Pollock, 2004), as well as understanding how and what they feel about it (Singleton & Hays, 2008). In a qualitative study conducted by Markowitz and Puchner (2014), the researchers found that pre-service and in-service teacher participants, White and Black, believed that “good people are not only free from racism, they also do not notice race” (p. 74). This study, as well as additional scholarship (See e.g. Pollock, 2004; Singleton & Hays, 2008) suggested that, most of the time, teachers believed that it is better to ignore race rather than

acknowledge it. Lee (2012) writes, “Many individuals have been taught that in polite society, it is not okay to acknowledge difference” (p. 49). Such a misguided belief directly impacts teachers’ ability to manipulate their instruction to respond to culturally diverse learners. Effective teaching requires recognizing and responding to differences, including racial differences (Lee, 2012). The avoidance of race significantly impacts the way teachers teach, and ultimately, the way students learn. Specifically, the notion of “color-blindness” can perpetuate deficit ideology, in which teachers approach and interact with students based on perceived and mostly stereotyped, weaknesses rather than their strengths (Gorski, 2011). Colorblindness also supports hegemonic curriculum and race privilege in the classroom, as “othered” cultural knowledge is often subverted by the dominant voice and knowledge. So, while race talk can create discomfort, anxiety and can, at times, yield conflict (Lee, 2012; Singleton & Hays, 2008), it is necessary in order to facilitate a critical multicultural, culturally responsive educational experience that supports academic success for all students.

### **Invest in alternative ways of knowing and understanding.**

As we attempt to analyze dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two

dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. An unauthentic word, one which is unable to transform reality, results when dichotomy is imposed upon its constitutive elements. When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism*, into an alienated and alienating ‘blah.’ It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action. (Freire, 1970, p. 68)

In this quotation, Freire articulates what has happened to multiculturalism as both a word and a framework; it has become idle chatter, an alienated blah. The word and concept of multiculturalism has gained societal baggage that is weighing down its capacity to be an effective, transformative pedagogical framework for art educators. Inaccurate, naïve conceptions regarding race, ethnicity, and culture (Lee, 2012) continue to work against multicultural education theory and praxis. Fortunately, effective educators have the “capacity to explore, understand and transform their own thinking about the means and the ends of teaching (Smyth, 2011, p. 28). Therefore, I urge art educators to *invest in an alternative way of knowing and*

*understanding* multiculturalism. Conceptions of multiculturalism in art education need to transition from “reflection to action” as Freire (1993) suggests. Additionally, multiculturalism needs to be better framed around “wider structural constraints, such as racism, sexism and discrimination” (May & Sleeter, 2010, p. 7). This realignment is what *critical* multiculturalism fosters.

Multiculturalism has developed into a mainstream educational framework that is non-threatening to the status quo; and in some ways, it has helped to maintain inequities by its “deracialized” discourse (May & Sleeter, 2010, p. 7). Over a decade ago, critical multiculturalism emerged as an educational framework used to directly challenge the more liberal, passive forms of multiculturalism that educators used to combat educational inequality (May & Sleeter, 2010). In art education, we see these more benevolent forms of multiculturalism in projects such as the creation of African masks, Native American dream catchers, totem poles, sand paintings, eating ethnic foods, reading folk tales, singing and dancing (Acuff, 2014a). According to Stoll (2014), “Education can actually provide more effective strategies for masking racism as opposed to challenging it...” (p. 691). Multiculturalism in its liberal iteration is illustrative of this kind of harmful, negligent education that Stoll (2014) describes. Critical multiculturalism is, instead, a framework that assists in a “fuller analysis of oppression and the institutionalization of unequal power relations in education” (May & Sleeter, 2010, p. i). Critical multiculturalism places race at the crux of institutionalized, systemic oppressions.

I argue that art educators should assume the theoretical framework of critical multiculturalism and its associated rhetoric in their pedagogy and curriculum development. Critical multicultural discourse draws from the “activist origins of multiculturalism by centering the critical analysis of power” (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013, p. 300). Art educators should more consistently ground their practice in a discourse that analyzes institutional power, and questions the creation of culture and ownership of knowledge.

In addition to the use of critical multiculturalism’s tenets and frame, I urge art educators to solely use the term “critical multiculturalism” instead of “multiculturalism” when describing pedagogy and curriculum centered on power critiques and equity in arts education. Permanently moving the language from multiculturalism to critical multiculturalism illustrates a commitment to a new discourse that has new priorities. The addition of “critical” to multiculturalism implies an understanding of educational inequity, and oppressive, systemic cultural subjugation and that the educator understands that race and racism is at the core of institutionalized inequity. An educator’s use of “critical” denotes that there is a personal consciousness and understanding of how oppression is perpetuated, especially in formal schools and other learning institutions. Additionally, the educator gives priority to critiquing disparate distributions of systemic power and privilege, rather than embracing different cultures and developing cultural tolerance (May & Sleeter, 2010).

To translate critical multicultural education theory to practice, I suggest art educators invest in knowing critical



multiculturalism as a framework of questioning. In order to bring critical multiculturalism from reflection to action as Freire (1993) suggested, use critical multiculturalism as a guide for questioning: “Is it true?... Who says so? Who benefits most when people believe it is true? How are we taught to accept that it is true? What alternative ways of looking at the problem can we see?” (Sleeter & Grant as cited in Acuff, 2013, p. 221). Embracing this alternative way of knowing and understanding critical multicultural art education can initiate significant inquiries that then lead to action. The following inquiry<sup>5</sup> is an exemplar of the kind of critical questioning critical multiculturalism can initiate during the development of art education pedagogy and practices.

**What art education practices re-inscribe oppression or liberate our children in negotiating their realities?**

Art educators are implicated in the maintenance or deterioration of institutionalized power (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013). Apple (2004) states that education is not a neutral enterprise, and “by the very nature of the institution, the educator [is] involved, whether he or she [is] conscious of it or not, in a political act” (p. 1). Therefore, art educators must

consider if their pedagogy, curriculum and instructional strategies are hegemonic in that they recreate an oppressive institutionalized structure for learning. Art educators re-inscribe oppressive systems when they develop classroom experiences without considering the cultural frames of reference of their students or the society that constructs their students’ realities. Art educators can instead, commit to learning about their students’ lives and place that knowledge at the forefront of classroom, pedagogy, and curriculum objectives.

As art educators develop processes of liberation through educational decisions, there must first be a consideration of how oppression is re-inscribed in the life and realities of historically marginalized groups. For example, hooks (1999) writes,

If we compare the relative progress Africa Americans have made in education and employment to the struggle to gain control over how we are represented, particularly in the mass media, we see that there has been little change in the area of representation. Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most like to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy. Those images may be constructed by white people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy—internalized racism. (p. 1)

Mass media images are produced by power institutions; power institutions

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<sup>5</sup> At the onset of this manuscript, I intended to present three inquiries developed around critical multicultural education theory. However, requirements regarding manuscript length resulted in my decision to focus more in depth on one question, rather than shallowly discussing all three questions. The other two inquiries included: How are we investing in the preservation of our children’s lives through our art education pedagogy? & What art education practices should be (re)considered if the truth is that oppression will always be a human condition?

create, shape and regulate social identities (Ferguson, 2000). Historically and contemporarily, Black and Brown bodies are authoritatively defined by the mass media. As a result, the collective African American identity and appearance has been stigmatized (Rolling, 2004). Certain objects<sup>6</sup> have become *signs* (Smith-Shank, 2004) that are often unconsciously associated with Black and Brown individuals; an “aesthetic of Blackness” so to speak (Boyd, 1997, p. 2). Such imagery imposes superficial dispositions and manipulated narratives<sup>7</sup> on non-dominant groups. The consequences of this institutionalized propaganda include racial profiling by law enforcement, intergroup fear, and consistent branding as criminally inclined. Ferguson (2000) writes, “Just as children were tracked into futures as doctors, scientists, engineers, word processors, and fast-food workers, there were also tracks for some children, predominately African American and male, that lead to prison” (p. 2). Additionally, Black and Brown men, women and children start to believe they indeed are inferior to other racial groups (Kohli, 2014), and believe that their lives are “unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection” (hooks, 1999, p. 2; *Also see* Ladson-Billings, 2009). Art educators can play a key role in renegotiating the destructive, unjustly designated signs that impact students’ educational, professional and societal futures. Art educators must ask themselves, “Am I questioning cultural signs, signifiers and visual imagery in my classroom? Am I building students’ critical consciousness

around socially constructed media and its implications on individuals’ lives?” If art educators answer no to these reflective questions, they are implicitly supporting the narratives that the images disseminate. Paraphrasing Rich (1979), Fine (1987) writes, “Lying is done with words and also with silence” (p. 157). Silence re-inscribes cultural subjugation, discredits counter narratives, and “undermines fundamentally the vision of education as empowerment...” (Fine, 1987, p. 157). Furthermore, the act of silencing “constitutes a process of institutionalized policies and practices which obscure the very social, economic, and therefore experiential conditions of students’ daily lives” (Fine, 1987, p. 157). Art educators can work to liberate students from these imposed realities by acknowledging and deconstructing institutionalized images of certain groups of people. The practice of naming things that are absent “breaks the spell of things that are. We must struggle to expand the space for imagining an alternative way of being, a qualitatively different universe of discourse and action” (Goodman, 1996, p. 22).

It is imperative that art educators understand that “past fears and antagonisms are encoded in images and symbols” (Pieterse, 1995, p. 9); thus, the lived realities of students are inevitably intertwined with these illustrations. However, signs are not stagnant and “the meanings we attribute to them [can] change over time as the contexts and our own understandings change” (Smith-Shank, 2004, p. vii). Furthermore, “the arts [and art educators] have the ability to inspire the as yet uninspired or render visible the unseen” (Vasudevan et al, 2010, p. 54). Art educators have the linguistic, theoretical and philosophical

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<sup>6</sup> Such as, large and saggy jeans, ball caps, and hooded sweatshirts (Boyd, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Such as all Black men are thugs, from the “hood”, rappers, or gangstas.

tools to open a dynamic discourse that actively responds to and potentially transforms the way images re-inscribe oppression and racism.

Another practice that supports the liberation of our children and the negotiation of their lived realities is the re-negotiating of universal narratives. Universal narratives, or master narratives, are ideological scripts that are imposed by those in authority on everyone else (Moyers, 1990). These narratives shape and define whose knowledge is significant. Freire (1993) proclaims, “Education is suffering from narration sickness” (p. 52). There needs to be a destabilizing of power when it comes to normalizing knowledge. Those from oppressed groups have “internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, [and] are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to effect this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility” (Freire, 1993, p. 29). Building on the research of Maxine Greene (2000), Vasudevan et al (2010) write, “Expression through the arts opens up spaces of possibility, particularly for youth, to engage and nurture the work of the imagination and enact their ‘deliberative agency’ in the ways in which they (re)write themselves...” (p. 54). Rewriting can be done through narrative work. The act of storytelling “requires one to name one’s reality” (Ballengee-Morris, 2013, p. 45). Stories assist humans in making sense of the world, themselves and others (Vasudevan et al, 2010); stories have the power to make change (Ballengee-Morris, 2013). Gay (2000) proclaims, “The whats and whys of narratives are never chance occurrences or mere happenstance. They have deliberate intentionality, ‘voice,’ positionality, and

contestability” (p. 3). Educators can help students develop and share their own authentic narratives that counter socially imposed, oppressive ideas about and images of themselves. These narratives can take the form of various art media, including cultural artifacts, visual arts, theatre, dance, text, and music (Ballengee-Morris, 2013; Vasudevan et al, 2010).

Considering a question such as, “What art education practices re-inscribe oppression or liberate our children in negotiating their realities?” directs teachers towards action. Critical multicultural education theory guides a pedagogy that helps students identify the uniqueness of their individual cultures and critiques power on the macro and micro level. It guides the development of inquiries that can mobilize knowledge to become active.

## **Conclusion**

Critical multiculturalism helps teachers prepare students to “combat inequity by being highly competent and critically conscious” (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 34). In considering how to operationalize critical multiculturalism, one should refrain from thinking so literally about “what to do” and instead be thinking about

the social contexts, about the students, about the curriculum and about instruction. Instead of the specific lessons and activities that we select to fill the day, we must begin to understand the ways our theories and philosophies are made to manifest in pedagogical practices and rationales we exhibit in the classroom. (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 34)

The investments that I bring forth in this paper are in line with Ladson-Billings' (2011) suggestion to think about the social contexts, the students, the curriculum and instruction. Primarily, I assert that a significant investment in critical multiculturalism requires art educators to commit to *learning* not only about themselves and their failures, but also about students' lives. Consequently, delving into the lives of students can and should inform a curriculum that is both critical and multicultural. Also, I propose that art educators embrace *alternative ways of knowing and understanding* critical multiculturalism. Critical multiculturalism can be identified as a pedagogical framework that questions power. Utilizing critical multiculturalism as a framework for creating pedagogical inquiries results in sustained status of "being" critically multicultural. Educators should think of critical multicultural education as "less a thing and more [as] an ethical position they need to take in order to ensure that students are getting the education to which they are entitled" (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 44). This "being" will inform ways of "doing," thus operationalizing critical multiculturalism.

Critical multiculturalism has a transformative pulse that unmask and interrogates systemic power and privilege (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013). We do not live in a post-racial society, and the criminalization and dehumanization of Black and Brown bodies is consistent with that assertion (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). I urge art educators to invest in reconceptualizing critical multiculturalism and breaking down preconceptions of it being an intangible task. Such deconstruction is vital if art teachers' shared belief really *is* that arts

have the power to develop human potential (National Art Education Association, 2014).

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